

Glasscaster with Marcie Davis Marvin Lipofsky— Inspiring a New Generation of Glass Artists

Photos courtesy of Schantz Galleries

Sculpture photography by M. Lee Fatherree

Below are excerpts from a Glasscaster interview featuring glass artist, Marvin Lipofsky. Glasscaster podcasts feature “hot glass talk in a high tech world.” This series, hosted by Marcie Davis, can be found at www.fireladyproductions.com or on iTunes.

As your blown glasswork matured, it got bigger and bigger. Tell us a bit about this evolution.

That, again, was just a progression with what was going on. It didn't get bigger until I started going to factories in Europe. I was invited to a seminar in Sweden. There were just a few Americans there. I delivered a paper at the conference, visited factories, and met their designers.

I started traveling because, as a professor at UC Berkeley, I was a one-person department. Sculpture (using clay and metal) was my main interest while I was in graduate school. I didn't have much of a background in glass, except what Harvey Littleton taught us. There were some opportunities to go to Europe, and I realized that Europe was where to find the information for glass. I started traveling around, looking at things, meeting designers, and visiting factories. Then I had a sabbatical from Berkeley in 1970. I went to Europe and met other artists. Out of that came invitations to work in factories—Leerdam and Nuutajarvi in 1970; Venini in 1972; and Nanby, Japan, in 1975. On the invitation of Stanislav Libensky, I worked in Czechoslovakia one summer in 1982.

It was quite exciting. I would never be as good a glassblower as a lot of the factory workers were, because that's what they did every single day. I tried to use my aesthetic in the context of what was going on in the factory and not do something so unusual that the workers didn't understand. I just used the techniques that they knew, which was blowing into molds, so I started making molds.

The first factory that I ever did any work at was Blenko Glass Factory in West Virginia, with Joel Philip Myers when he was designing there. He invited me to come down and visit and work in 1968,

In 1970 I had been invited by Kaj Franck, who was considered the dean of Scandinavian Design, to come to Finland. I met him at the World Craft Council in Dublin. We had a small furnace and were blowing glass. He asked me if I could do that in Helsinki, and I said, being an American, “Of course.” He invited me to come that winter to Helsinki and lead a seminar at the School of Art and Design. We built a small furnace, and I taught the students what I knew. After a week, I went to the Nuutajarvi factory, where I worked with a team for a few days.



SF - Tacoma Group, 2006-7 #5, 14-1/2" x 18" x 18"



1970
University of Industrial Arts
Helsinki, Finland
in photo: Marvin Lipofsky, students



1971
Bezalel Academy
Jerusalem, Israel
in photo: Marvin Lipofsky, students

It was just before Christmas, so the workers were off. A couple of young guys stayed in the factory to help the students blow glass, and they had one day that they just went wild in the factory using all the equipment blowing glass, not having really learned too much in the week before. But I was invited to work with a team, so they gave me a team and said that I could work there for a couple of days. I didn't want to draw designs and have them make it, so I looked around the factory and saw where they threw out all of their used wooden molds in a big heap in the back of the factory. From those I assembled something they could blow glass into. I started working with the team. They didn't expect me to help, but I wanted to be part of the team and be able to control the shape, so I became the “mold boy”—the person who handled the mold. That's how my approach all started. From there I started using the wood from the factory, making my own shapes to blow glass into.

Describe for me the evolution of one of your signature pieces from conception to birth.

I don't draw out my pieces. My "drawing" is in making the mold or the parts for the mold, and it's a mold that has parts that come apart so I can have undercuts. As the glass is pulled out, pieces of the wood come out with it so they don't trap the glass.

Do you use different materials for the molds?

I did in the beginning. I used whatever I found in the factory—old metal parts, some corrugated parts, some things like that, but then I just started to make wooden molds. Most of the European factories have wood shops where they make the molds for the goblets and the vases and so forth, because they have to be standardized. I would go into the wood shop and start by cutting out the shapes myself on the bandsaw, just cutting the edges down and making them round. The workers started helping me, because there was a lot of work to do. But I started just cutting it myself, which was fairly easy for me.

Is there a lot of sanding as well?

No. I left it rather crude, because when the glass hit the wood it would start to burn, so it would all smooth out over the use of the wooden pieces. I just filed off the rough edges, because glass doesn't like to make a right angle. It's much better when it's soft.

People thought I was sort of nutty, because they're used to making these nice vase forms, and I would come in there and make strange shapes. We had an assemblage of a bunch of junk and molded the glass into this junk pile. I couldn't repeat the shapes each time exactly, so each piece is a history of where it was made. It was very unique to that time and place.

Now when I look at the slides of your work I'm going to know that the shape is based on what they had in that factory at the time. After you blow the piece, when did all the cutting come in?

What I would do was then ship everything back to my studio in Berkeley, and I would work on them myself. I'd use a tile saw with a large diamond blade on it, and I would cut the pieces up, cut areas out. I've always thought that the glass has an outer shell as well as an inner shell quality to it. Just like people, what's on the outside isn't always what's on the inside. Sometimes I was able to work with different colors on the inside than what was on the outside of the glass, so I would cut holes into it to release what was going on inside. I take a felt pen and draw where I'm going to cut on it. I usually let them sit around for a while and kind of looked at them and see what I want to do. Sometimes there would be something—a fracture or something that wasn't quite right—and I could then cut that out. That would be the start of what shapes I was going to make cutting into the glass.

I would sometimes cut out part of it if I didn't quite like the color, shape, or something like that. I use the saw blade to grind away parts; that's just the rough cut. Then I use a flexible shaft with a diamond burr on it and cut the rest of the pieces away. Then there's a lot of hand work with diamond pads to smooth out the edges. I would go from rough to a 400-grit pad and smooth all the edges of the piece by hand.

I never liked the shiny glass. I would sandblast the piece and then dip it into an acid polishing solution, which would soften the sandblasting and bring out a little bit of sheen to it.



Small California Loop Series, 1978 #7, 8 1/2" x 18" x 9"



1991
Crystalex Hantich Factory
Novy Bor, Czechoslovakia
in photo: Marvin Lipofsky



1990
Museum Courtyard
Pecs, Hungary
in photo: Marvin Lipofsky



So it wouldn't be as matte as regular sandblasting, but it would be a little satiny but not shiny?

Yes, it would be a little satiny. I started realizing that these big shiny pieces of glass just reflected the lights that were in the room, and so you wouldn't see the shape as much as you'd see the reflections on the surface. I wanted to dull that so you would see the shape of the sculpture. That's what I was after. As a secondary idea, it was much easier to photograph. I see a lot of bad photographs with big, shiny reflections on them.

Glass is so hard to photograph. It's a little bit easier to videotape, but even there you get so many reflective surfaces. You can't help it. So did you do this acid application to both the inner and outer surfaces?

Yes, I had to. Then there's another little secret. One of the reasons why there are holes in all the pieces is because I couldn't float the piece in the acid solution. It had to sink into the solution, so there had to be holes for the solution to drain from. All my shapes worked with my techniques, and basically I used the techniques of the factory. If you blew a piece of glass, there'd always be a whole in one end where the pipe was. I started to cut that away to get rid of it, because it always looked the same. That was the start of the piece, and usually that was the front of the piece. I would cut that all away most of the time. Sometimes I left it if it was interesting to me, but that's basically how I've worked. As the pieces became larger, they were harder to hold and harder to cut. At one point when I was working in the Czech Republic at a symposium, I decided to cut these big pieces in half. Therefore, I would get two pieces instead of just one.

That's efficient.

I still have some of the halves, but it was easier to work on the pieces. It opened up the glass to be another interesting shape.

It sounds as if you've spent lots of time cold working. Is there a standard percentage of the time you spend to blow the piece versus what percentage of time is spent in the finishing?

The blowing is a lot quicker than the cold working. If I were working with a team it would be much faster. That was sort of the minimal time, setting things up and blowing it. The cold working would be two, three weeks sometimes. I'd look at it and see what it looked like and turn it around and so forth. Doing it myself also took time, and it's rather tedious. But it's quiet time in the studio. It's not like blowing it with a lot of people around you.

Do you prefer to work with a team or to work on your own?

To blow the pieces, it's essential that I work with a team. When I'm in a factory, that's what's available. When I started out I blew everything myself. My earlier work was all blown by myself. But then shipping the work back to my studio was just solitary time where I work. Now, there are a few pieces that I made that were polished, and I had some help from some of my students and friends to help polish it. Polishing is a tedious time.

Do you still do any clay or any metal work?

No, I haven't touched anything. I make things—I always make things. Even when I was a kid I made things. I was a Boy Scout and carved neckerchief slides and things like that. I worked with my hands. That's how I got into industrial design.

I was going to ask you how you ended up there.

Well, I knew that I wasn't going to be a physicist or a lawyer. There wasn't much left. I wasn't going to be a basketball player. Things sort of narrow themselves down. I was interested in the artistic side of things, and as I looked at what I wanted to do, design seemed to be a profession to satisfy your parents. But while I was there I took all the sculpture classes that I could, and I taught myself how to weld and things like that. So progressively as things came up, I jumped on it when I saw what was going on. I actually went to Europe at the end of my undergraduate days with another guy who was a sculptor whom I had met before, and we cast some bronze pieces in Italy at a foundry. I also went to Murano and saw glass. That was the summer before I started at the university, so I had seen it but I didn't pay too much attention to it.



Otaru Series, 1987–88 #9, 9" x 12" x 11"



1999
Dalian Shengdao
Dalian, China
in photo: Wang Dai Too, Marvin Lipofsky

2006

1st International Symposium of Art Glass
Gus-Khrustalny, Vladimir Regon, Russia
in photo: Marvin Lipofsky



Is there anything we didn't touch on?

Oh, there's probably a lot. Teaching was a big part of everything, trying to bring information to the students. I used to bring anything I found that was written. I would staple it up on the walls for techniques and pictures and what have you. When people would ask questions, I'd just tell them to go read the walls because everything was there.

I also had the students do a little bit of research. They would do papers. What I tried to get them to do is to go to galleries and interview the artists—to call them and visit their studios if possible, then come back and give a presentation to the class of those artists and what they were doing and how they did it. Most of the artists were very receptive, and some of the students made friends with these people—painters and sculptors and what have you. They got out into the professional world that way.

That's a great assignment, really.

They also knew that you don't walk into a gallery and start asking questions of the people behind the counter. You call before and make an appointment and then talk to them. And if a gallery shows photographs, you don't bring a box of wine glasses in and want them to take them to sell. A lot of people just force themselves on a gallery, and people won't talk to them because they don't have time. They're busy with their business.

I also set up a show for the students at the end of the year with some galleries around the country that were showing glass, and the students then would organize the show themselves. I'd set it up and they'd work with the gallery owner and ship the work off and have a little show. They had to learn how to ship and pack and make invoices. We always made an announcement or poster or something like that with them, too. Those things are very important.

And the rest, as they say, is history!

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